

WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS?

I Timothy 2: 1-7
Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1

Faith Community
September 23, 2001

Introduction

We are in extreme mourning. The attack on our nation, and on the lives of thousands of innocent people has left us, first in shock, and now in painful mourning for those who have died in a senseless, unbelievably cruel act of terror.

As we have watched tireless workers uncover the massive wreckage of the World Trade Centers our hearts have been broken. This is a national sorrow deeper than we have ever known before. The world, including many who have been considered enemies, has joined us in not only condemning this attack, but mourning with us. As a people we are hurt; our sorrow permeates this nation.

I

When I read the lectionary reading for today I could hardly believe what I saw. I don't know if there is any more appropriate scripture passage in the Bible for our country today.

Jeremiah is in the same place we are. He is in extreme mourning. He sees his people suffering, and he is suffering with them. He cries out to God in his anguish. "Is there no balm in Gilead?" he cries. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick," he says.

Jeremiah knows the kind of suffering we are experiencing and he cries out to God. But where is God? "Is the Lord not in Zion?" he says, "Is her king not in her?" We too have asked ourselves, "Where is God in all this?"

II

Some have actually said God is responsible for this tragedy. Televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have claimed that God has done this to us as a judgment against us for being so tolerant of abortions, gay rights, the ACLU, feminism, and other social changes.

Last week Jerry Falwell said, "The pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and lesbians...the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

However we feel about these social issues, to make a statement linking our loving and faithful God to this cruel act of mass murder, is not only reckless and irresponsible, it is blasphemy.

Blasphemy is profane or contemptuous speech concerning God. What could be more profane than to linking God to this horrid act of violence? To say that God did this, or even that it is God's wish that this would happen to our nation, is a heinous perversion of the Christian gospel.

I'm afraid these people are using religion to promote their own political agenda. It looks as if they are drawing on religion to support their political stance, even when they pervert religion in order to make it fit.

Their primary concern is political - opposition to feminism, gay rights, and abortion - and they are using religion as a defense for it.

III

Osama Bin Laden is doing the same thing. His main objective is the hatred and destruction of the United States. He uses the Muslim religion as a way validating his cause.

His interpretation of Islam is a perversion of that faith. No religion, certainly not Islam, calls for the slaughter of 6000 innocent people. None of the world's major religions supports intentional acts of murder.

The *Jihad* that Bin Laden calls on as a "holy war" is not the right to indulge in the all-out slaughter of people, but the right of a family or a people to defend themselves if they are attacked. It is about self-defense.

It seems clear that these Muslim terrorists primary concern is their hatred, and they are using their religion to support their cause. I saw a program on PBS a couple of nights ago, which included a panel of Muslims talking about their religion and this horrible tragedy. One of the panelists made a comment that I found especially helpful. He said, "One of the terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center, who was supposed to be a devout Muslim, was found just a couple of days before that drinking excessively in a bar with naked women dancing all around him. That isn't exactly what a devout Muslim would be doing." His point is well taken.

To me this is similar to the Klu Klux Klan in America. They are mostly concerned with their hatred, and acting on the bigotry they hold. They use the Christian religion and the Bible to try to support their actions, even though those acts are clearly un-Christian and un-biblical.

Surely we would not want people to judge Christianity by the Klu Klux Klan perversion of it. So we cannot judge Islam by the actions of its radical extremists.

Their primary interest is not religion or faith, but justifying their own hatred.

IV

What then is the real role of God in all this? If God is not involved in wanting this to happen, as fundamentalist in Christianity or Islam claim, then what does the Bible say about God's place in a tragedy like this?

That brings us back to Jeremiah. He is distraught by what has happened to his people. Like us, he cries out to God asking if God has left his people. Has God abandoned them in their time of need?

The answer the Bible gives is that God is not absent. In fact, very much the opposite, God grieves for his people too. As Jeremiah is in anguish for his people, so is God in anguish for them too.

All through the Bible we see that when God's people suffer, God suffers with them. It is God who says, "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

Albert Schweitzer once wrote about what he called, "The brotherhood of those who bear the marks of pain." He meant those who are drawn together because they have all experienced awful pain, which has left its mark on their lives.

What is very clear from the Bible is that God is part of that "brotherhood of those who bear the marks of pain."

If we couldn't see it anywhere else, it is so obvious in the suffering, pain, humiliation, and death of Jesus Christ. In that experience God suffered enormous pain. God knows what it is like for his son to suffer and die. God knows what it is to bear the marks of pain, and God suffers with us when we are in pain.

Conclusion

Where is God in all of this? Our faith assures us that God stands right beside us. As we are hurt by what has happened, so God is hurt as well. We suffer, and our God suffers with us.

The One who brought about all creation, weeps when that creation is misused. The one who loved us so much that he sent his own son knows what it is to feel pain.

Where is God in all this? God is with us. God stands beside us. The tears of God are mingled with our tears. God supports us in our suffering, because God has suffered too.

The One who is the enemy of evil will prevail.

Amen.